The Tasmanians—A Summary

By

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In his journal of 1642 Tasman gave to the world the first account of the Tasmanian aborigines. At Blackman's Bay on the east coast his pilot-major and a party of men went ashore in search of fresh water. They heard human voices, saw trees notched at intervals of five feet with what they presumed were stone implements and gazed at clouds of dense smoke rising from numerous fires, but they did not see the aborigines themselves.

Early in March, 1774, Marion du Fresne with two vessels anchored in the same bay as Tasman had done. The numerous fires and the clouds of smoke seen as they passed along the coast led the Frenchman to think the country was densely populated. An armed party came ashore and met a group of 30 men accompanied by women and children. The French spent an hour with the natives before M. Marion arrived. He was at once offered a firebrand and, thinking to show friendship, lit a pile of wood that had been placed near. He had obviously done the wrong thing for the natives at once retreated to a hill nearby, attacked the French with stones, wounding several, including M. Marion himself, and showed every sign of hostility. The French retreated to their boats and moved along the shore. The natives sent their women and children into the bush and followed the boats hurling spears at the French when they attempted to land. The French retaliated, killing one native and wounding several others. The natives at once fled in terror, leaving their dead comrade, who was carefully examined. He was found to be five feet three inches high and scarified on the chest like the Mozambique Kaffirs. He looked black in colour, but when they washed him they found he was really dark brown.

The Tasmanians differed from the Australians in appearance and culture, and were never numerous. Although G. A. Robinson always claimed that the 203 brought in at the end of the 'Black War' were all that remained of the 7000 who inhabited Tasmania at the beginning of white settlement, there seems no doubt that his estimate of the original population was quite wrong. James Backhouse, who visited Tasmania in 1832, declared that there were 'probably never more than from 700 to 1000', and Dr. Milligan, a keen observer who first came into contact with the natives in 1829, states that 'it does not appear probable that the aggregate aboriginal population did materially, if at all, exceed 2000'. Basing his calculation on a distribution of one aboriginal to 16 square miles of country,

Robinson estimated the aboriginal population of Victoria as 5000. If we adopt the same basis for Tasmania we find the population would approximate 1500, but Tasmania with its mountains and dense forests affords a scantier food supply than Victoria and would not support so many aborigines. The evidence of those who visited Tasmania before settlement or saw the aborigines in the early years, leads one to an estimated population of about 1200.

The early explorers, Cook, d'Entrecasteaux, du Fresne and Baudin, saw only small groups. Kelly, who circumnavigated Tasmania in 1815-16, on several occasions on the west and north-west coasts saw what he describes as 'a large body of natives', but fortunately on one occasion he amplifies his statement by adding 'at least fifty in number'. When he visited Macquarie Harbour in January, 1819, Allan Cunningham met with a group of 20, consisting of men, women and children; at the Shannon in 1823 Dr. Ross met 'a tribe of about 60 or 70'. This was the tribe he tells us that had sometimes visited Hobart.

At Cape Portland, Kelly saw 'about three hundred' dancing a corroboree to celebrate a successful seal hunt; two hundred are reported as having visited the infant settlement at Georgetown; and, in a report made twenty-six years after the event, an eyewitness of the attack on the natives at Risdon gave their number as three hundred; but in view of the fact that only on these three occasions do we find mention of groups exceeding 60 or 70—and in the light of the surrounding circumstances—we may regard the reports as overstatements.

Skeletal remains as well as descriptions given by explorers and early settlers point to a homogeneous race. The natives generally had flat noses, wide nostrils, full fleshy lips and big ears with large lobes. The men had woolly beards. Bligh's crew reported 'big bushy beards'. In one account G. A. Robinson stresses a variation of these characteristics: 'They were fine looking men about 5 ft. 9 in. high, well proportioned, broad shouldered, their features resembling those of a white man, intelligent countenances, the beard like that of a Polish Jew growing long and to a point at the extremity of the chin leaving the under lip bare, the upper with moustaches which altogether gave them a majestic appearance'. This was written of some natives on the west coast, but it does not apply to any of those who were brought from there to captivity at Flinders Island; nor does it fit William Lanné, or King Billy as he is usually styled. Lanné, the last surviving male aboriginal, was of the West Coast Tribe and had the typical features of his race. The artist Duterreau drew from life portraits of the aborigines in their native garb, but the appearance of none conforms in any way to Robinson's account. It would appear that Robinson saw this ill-fated race through a haze of pity and romance, something as the French explorers saw them in the glamour of the opinions of Rousseau.

Captain Cook describes the aborigines as 'of common stature but rather slender', and the French explorers spoke of them as of ordinary height, but Kelly described two men he saw on a small island off the west coast as 'about six feet high'. Near West Point he saw six huge men each above six feet high, and at Maandai Point a chief about six feet high and an old man about six feet seven inches high. Allan Cunningham also spoke of the aborigines as tall. The men he said 'were all about 5½ to little less than 6 feet high . . . The women were proportionately smaller'. Such accounts conflict with actual measurements. The man killed by du Fresne was five feet three; Péron measured a number and found they ranged from five feet six to five feet eight. Of the twenty-three men measured by Robinson the shortest was five feet one, the tallest five feet seven and a half; of the 29 women the shortest was four feet three, the tallest five feet four. Measured

skeletons give comparable results. The explanation of the discrepancy lies in the fact that observers are generally prone to overestimate the height of a native man. Kelly and Cunningham were not exceptions.

This small population had, by the time of settlement, developed four distinct dialects. In a speech made in Sydney in 1838, Robinson stated that he had to learn four languages to make himself understood by the natives generally.

Visual evidence of the length of the occupation of Tasmania by the natives is afforded by well patinated stone implements; the immense shell mounds at Little Swan Port which for many years were worked extensively as a quarry for limestone without seriously reducing the quantity; several large shell mounds on the west coast, one of which is five feet high, sixteen feet long and sixteen feet broad; the huge midden at Rocky Cape which on excavation proved to be just over fifteen feet deep; the numerous coastal headlands round the island bestrewn with kitchen middens; and the abundance of worked stone implements which occur throughout the length and breadth of the island.

In the Rocky Cape midden at the 12-13 feet level the right upper jaw of a parrot fish was found—a surprising and puzzling discovery in view of the statements of those who had observed the natives and knew their habits that scale fish were not eaten.

During the winter months the aborigines stayed in close proximity to the seacoast and kept within their respective districts; in summer they roved about the island, seeking their various needs. The hæmatite deposits near the source of the Blythe River, a mountainous district intersected by deep ravines, were well known to the aborigines, and tribes from far and near regularly visited the deposits to procure the mineral which, under the name of *lattewiner*, was held in high esteem by the men for adorning their bodies and raddling their hair. The Cider Gum, *Eucalyptus gunnii*, plentiful in the Lake Country, was also much prized. In late spring the sap flows freely from any injured tree and is eagerly sought by wattle birds and honeyeaters generally. It has a sweet agreeable taste very much like that of the manna frequently found beneath white-gum trees, *Eucalyptus viminalis*, and was much appreciated by the natives who gashed the stem of a tree near the base and collected the viscous liquid in a hole. When allowed to remain any length of time it is said to ferment and become a pleasant intoxicant.

In providing vessels to carry water the native women proved quite resourceful. On the sea coast shells when of suitable size were used; but such shells are rare in Tasmania. La Billardière relates that the women and girls brought water to the men who sat near their fires, using for the purpose vessels made from kelp and fastened into shape by skewers. At other times and in other places bark troughs were used. Allan Cunningham writes of the eagerness with which the natives sought bottles, recognising them as *moka* or vessels for carrying water. Another interesting *moka* is in existence—the cap of an aboriginal skull shaped to make an efficient container, which was found at Port Sorell close to a spring of fresh water. The women were skilled in making baskets by a simple plaiting method, using a fibre obtained from *Gahnia* or *Dianella* softened in front of the fire when green. These they used for carrying a few cherished scrapers, ochre, etc., when on the march, or to hold the shellfish and crustaceans gathered for food. From the same materials they plaited the cords by which they carried their children on their backs, and the strong rope used for climbing trees in search of opossum.

In their migrations the natives moved along definite trackways, and were so regular in their movements that settlers were able to anticipate their arrival and departure. On their journeys, and in warm weather, their shelters were mere

breakwinds formed by interlacing strips of bark with boughs or sticks stuck into the ground. At other times and in other places they built quite differently. W. B. Walker in 1827 saw in the vicinity of West Head near the Tamar 'two circular ranges of good huts, composed of bark and grass; . . . much in the form of an old-fashioned coal-scuttle turned wrong side up, the entrance about eighteen inches high, five feet or six feet at the back, and eight feet or ten feet long'. Jorgen Jorgensen, when engaged in looking for a practicable route from Hobart to the Hampshire Hills in September, 1826, saw a number of such disused dome-shaped huts near the Great Lake. The natives wisely avoided the central plateau during the cold wet months of the year. In March, 1827, he again was exploring the island for The V.D.L. Company, and on the west coast near Temma saw 'a very neat compact native hut. It bore all the marks of the simple rudiments of Gothic architecture, it rose in the shape of an oblong dome and might easily contain from 16 to 20 persons. The wood used for the principal supporters was bent in a curve and seems to have been rendered hard by fire. It was uncommonly neatly thatched and the doorway was about 2½ feet high'. Robinson, writing of such huts, says 'I entered several and found them to be very comfortable dwellings. Each was in the form of a semi-circular dome very commodious and quite weatherproof, some 10 or 12 feet in diameter and eight in height. The door or entrance was a small hole 14 inches by 2 feet high. This opening is made to answer for door, window and chimney. The insides of the huts were mostly covered with feathers of magpies, cockatoos and crows'.

Sites of such huts may still be seen. They are located in groups on sandy knolls. The natives seemed first to have scooped out a saucer-shaped depression of about seven feet in diameter to a depth of about two feet, and above it to have erected their hut. In the middle of every one of the depressions I have examined, there have been several long stones about one foot long and four to five inches wide, usually burnt, and sometimes broken, apparently by fire. Round about the fire stones, but within the depression, there are from two to three feet of shells in various stages of decomposition, ashes, charcoal, stone chippings and an occasional worked implement. From the number of hut sites grouped together, and from the known habit of the natives for each family to have its own fire, it would appear that each family occupied its own hut. In the cave shelters where they sometimes sought refuge from the weather, they made themselves as comfortable as possible by placing down bundles of grass to serve as couches.

They obtained fire by rapidly twirling a stick between the palms of the hands, bedding the point in a piece of soft bark lining a hole made for the purpose in a suitable piece of wood. Only on rare occasions in Tasmania are conditions favourable for making fire in this way, so the natives always carried a lighted fire-stick as they journeyed from place to place. They invariably made small fires, and from the method of laying the sticks the smoke in calm weather rose like a coiling pillar. As the colonists never learned the skill, native fires were readily distinguished.

The natives made two wooden weapons, the spear and the waddy. The former was a slender stick from eight to fifteen feet long sharpened at the end—frequently both ends—the point hardened by fire. It was thrown with remarkable accuracy upwards of fifty yards. Backhouse describes the waddy as 'a short stick about an inch in thickness, brought suddenly to a conical point at each end, and at one end a little roughened, to keep it from slipping out of the hand'. This was used both as a club and throwing stick. If need be 'pebble stones about the size of hens eggs' made formidable weapons as Kelly found to his cost. Within the past two years two interesting wooden implements have been unearthed near Marrawah;

one ten inches long, the other, more highly finished, seven inches. Each is fashioned from a root with the stem attached. The roots have been shaped into roughly spherical mallets, three inches in diameter; the stems into convenient handles. They are nicely balanced and would serve admirably as missiles against birds.

A comprehensive collection of stone implements would comprise crude undifferentiated flakes, pebble choppers, hand axes of varying sizes and finish, and flakes of specialized forms oftentimes with delicate secondary chipping. The latter reveal a striking platform at a constant angle of approximately 115 degrees from the unworked face of the artefact. Pygmy tools occur and are often carefully finished. No attempt was made to give an edge by grinding. Quartzite, breccia, chert, porcellanite, and basalt, were the chief materials used, but the native workman occasionally used the stone nearest at hand, though it seems to us quite unsuitable; no doubt it served the immediate need.

On west coast camp sites and occasionally elsewhere, large numbers of circular waterworn pebbles ranging from half an inch to two and a half inches in diameter are found, the periphery of each being worn down so symmetrically that a cylindrical shape is produced. The suggestion that they were hammer stones fails to convince, for some of them are so small and so light in weight, sometimes less than ¾-oz., as to be useless for such a purpose. Stones upon which ochre has been frequently ground are sometimes just as carefully shaped. Perhaps they had some ceremonial or magical significance. W. B. Walker, relating what he heard from W. Field, said that near the two circular ranges of huts his stock-keepers saw were ' numerous small places in form of birds'-nests, formed of grass, having constantly fourteen stones in each '. Unfortunately no description of the stones has survived and only conjecture remains.

Bone implements were also used, and those which survive are either sharp pointed awls or spatulas from five to eight inches in length.

Although Browne, Hellyer, Robinson, Calder, and others, have mentioned drawings on bark, and Robinson wrote of markings on rock, nothing was known to have survived of the artistic efforts of the aborigines until carvings in stone were discovered at three places, Devonport Bluff, Mt. Cameron West, and Trial Harbour. Circles, barred circles, parallel lines, and what appear to be representations of a fish and a snake are to be seen. In one of his notebooks Robinson states that the aboriginal females cut circles in their flesh in imitation of the sun and moon. ' The cicatrice of the sun and the moon is intended to remove inflammation and having the power of these luminaries they imagine it will have the same influence on the part affected ', he writes. In 1827 Hellyer ' saw a drawing of the moon done with charcoal ' on a slab of bark which formed a hut. Perhaps the circles on stone also represent the sun and the moon. To some extent these primitive people deified the moon. Gilbert Robertson stated that Tom and Dick, two Tasmanian aborigines who travelled about with him, said that their people were afraid of the moon. From others who had observed the aborigines we learn that it was customary to meet at every full moon for a grand corroboree. In a journal entry of 4 September, 1833, G. A. Robinson gives quite a different explanation of some large circles he saw cut on the face of rocks. These circles which were from twelve to eighteen inches in diameter were of two kinds, barred and plain; the barred he states represented white men, the plain, black men.

The natives crossed the many wide estuaries that intersect the coast line, and frequently visited outlying islands in a specialised form of canoe from ten to fifteen feet in length and three feet in width, made from three bundles of bark lashed together. The longest bundle was fastened between the other two making

a shallow double ended craft with long tapering ends curved upwards. Long sticks or spears served as paddles. Such canoes the early settlers called catamarans, a word derived from the Tamil, kattu-maram (tied logs), a correct definition, though, in Tasmania, bark bundles and occasionally reed-bundles replaced logs. In addition to this canoe so often seen, there is one record of a raft-like conveyance formed by two logs kept in position by cross timbers interwoven with a kind of wickerwork. The French explorers who have so fully described the canoes they saw, thought them fit only for crossing calm water, but an old whaler told Bonwick that he had seen one of them go across to Maatsuyker Island, a distance of seven miles, in the midst of a storm. In other words, such a canoe was seaworthy in the big seas which roll in from the Southern Ocean, and no doubt was the means by which the Tasmanians entered their island home.

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